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AUTHOR Dunham, L. L.
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ABSTRACT

The "legacy" of the humanities is discussed in terms of relevance, involvement, and other philosophical considerations. Reasons for studying foreign literature in language classes are developed in the article. Comment is also made on attitudes and ideas culled from the writings of Clifton Fadiman, Jean Paul Sartre, and James Baldwin. (RL)

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THE RELEVANCE OF LITERATURE

An address by Dr. L. L. Dunham delivered at the State Department of Education FL Conference, Roanoke, October, 1970.

I don't know to what extent literature in foreign languages is taught in schools in Virginia. It's rather limited in Oklahoma because most of our Oklahoma high schools only offer courses in the acquisition of the skills. And only in the larger high schools such as Tulsa, Oklahoma City, Bartlesville, Enid, and some of the larger cities is the foreign language offering wide enough to include the teaching of literature. But I have some very strong feelings on the teaching of literature, and I am going to let you have them.

I am not altogether happy with the title, "The Relevance of Literature," so I put a sub-title to it, "The Relevance of Literature, or No Man is an Island unto Himself." I am not altogether happy with the association of two words in the title, "relevance" and "literature," particularly with the connotation that has attached itself to the word "relevance" during the past decade. For I am certain that literature will continue to be with us in the future as it has in the past, long after some other popular and passing catchword or phrase has replaced the present cliche and the cause of "relevance" has been discarded and forgotten for another theme. I feel about "relevance" the way Gertrude Stein did about the use of the word "rose." You know, she complained that the word "rose" had lost its meaning, that it hadn't had any meaning for 300 years. It had been so overused that she came up with that famous quotation of hers, "A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose." I feel the same way about the word "relevance." Relevance is relevance is relevance is relevance.

I do not quite agree with Clifton Fadiman in this quotation that I am going to read. I would go farther than he. Fadiman said:

> "I sometimes indulge in the fantasy of thinking that the poets, the artists, the thinkers of the last 3000 years had some unconscious premonition of what was going to happen in the 21st century, that they reared their cathedrals, whether of stone, or ideals, or prayers, or pigments, or of sound against the eventuality of the technological takeover, that this was their legacy to us, the dawn men of the computer age."

That legacy, Fadiman said, is the humanities, the records of these faculties of men that are not concerned with mere survival, with production and consumption, with animal pleasure, or with frictionless living. And in this way, I would go even further in stating that the paradox of the humanities is that they are essential without being necessary. Fadiman goes on:

> "The human race can get along without Hamlet, or Sartre, or the B Minor Mass, or the Gettysburg Address; but only at the cost of having no knowledge of what makes it essentially human rather than animal or mechanical. It is especially within a technological society that such knowledge must be preserved and deepened as a counterveiling force to those forces that stress efficiency. The long drama of the race, particularly during the last two hundred years of that drama, features the machine as the hero. Before that time, man occupied the center of the stage. If he is ever to reoccupy it, we must keep in the mind of the young a vision of the whole vast drama."

Literature to me is not only essential, it is necessary. That's where I differ from Fadiman. It is one of the activities of man that has existed since man became man. It is an activity that makes him man rather than some other member of the animal kingdom. If we categorize some of the activities of man we will find certain basic ones such as agriculture, industry, trade, religion, philosophy, the arts, building, playing games, teaching, medicine, government..., and you could certainly add others. Literature, of course, is only one of the arts, but it is the one that we are primarily concerned with, I believe. It is found as early as most of the basic human activities known in history. Man cannot live without literature. It is necessary. It may be only an oral literature, but it is still literature; and it was carried on about the primitive campfires and in cave dwellings long before man could record his fiction, his poetry, or his drama. I shall never forget a feature article that appeared several years ago in Life magazine on some primitive tribe in some far corner of the world. One of the photographs illustrating the article showed a group of primitives seated around a campfire, listening to a speaker, identified by the author of the article as a storyteller spinning his fictional tale to his fellow tribesmen with only the fire to dispell the darkness of the night. There was literature in the making, fulfilling a human need as essential as necessary. So essential and so necessary that the primitive does not even question its relevance any more than he questions the air that he breathes to keep him alive.

What is this need that literature fulfills? We can fall into the trap of contemporary man as Mr. Arthur Samner says in Saul Bellow's novel, Mr. Samner's Planet. We can do as Mr. Samner said, we can try to explain it. Mr. Samner said:

> "Intellectual man has become an explaining creature, fathers to children, wives to husbands, lecturers to listeners, experts to laymen, colleagues to colleagues, doctors to patients, men to his own soul explained."

The roots of this, the causes of the other, the sources of events, the history, the structure, the reasons why..., for the most part, in one ear and out the other. The soul wanted what it wanted. It had its own natural knowledge. Now we can say yes. We can try and give some meaning to literature. What is it? You can add others, I am sure, to the ones I will mention in passing. Literature may be as Aristotle said, "the inherent characteristics of man to imitate, the mimetic quality," together with the corresponding desire of man to witness these mimetic acts or to experience them as we do in reading, in contrast to our seeing them as we do in the drama. Literature may be enjoyment, escape, play, games. Literature may be an attempt of man to come to terms with his world. To humanize the outside objective in different worlds. The inhuman world, let us call it. It may be a kind of catharsis for the reader — the writer too — who feels so oppressed by living, by reality that he is forced to come to terms with this reality, and he is only able to do so by putting it down on paper, and he is thereby relieved of the burden that haunts him. The reader is then, in turn, able to identify with the work of the author and he in turn is able to experience a like catharsis and its despairs, and its triumphs. Literature is thereby a means of ending one's alienation from the world and from one's fellow man. Literature helps to make us more humane.

I was giving a seminar two years ago in the Latin American short story, and we were reading a Chilean short story. Some of you in the Latin American field may be familiar with it. It was a short story of a shepherd boy in the far southern reaches of Chile. He was a shepherd boy in the sheep country. His father took the young lad, who was in his early teens, and left him out in the mountains, isolated with the sheep. Then the father rode off, left him there, came back within a period of a month to take the boy in and relieve him. The main point of the story is that the father returned and found that the boy in attempting to defend the sheep from an attacking condor had fought the condor and been killed by it. The boy also killed the condor with a shotgun. That wasn't the thing that struck me at all about the story. The thing that struck me was that I was able to share with that young boy in an area of the country that I had never hoped to visit and never hoped to experience. I was able to involve myself with him emotionally and experience his loneliness — that feeling of being away from everything human, absolutely isolated from all human contact.

I have never read until rather recently, I am sorry to say, James Baldwin. It did the same thing for me. It let me experience, it let me inside of what it means to live in a ghetto, to live in the horrors of a ghetto, the restrictions of a ghetto. The black — what do you call it — the asphalt jungle? That experience, every experience that I am involved with, another human being makes me a better human being. It expands my humanity.

I do not believe that you can tell students that it will help or solve all of the problems, that literature is the panacea for everything, anymore than you can say politics, economics, religion, or any of the other activities of man solve all of his problems. But I do think that you can tell them that it helps, and you can ask them to imagine a world without it. A world without literature would be a horror chamber. Literature — the humanities — are a means as Clifton Fadiman said, of keeping man in the center of the stage and relegating the place of the machine to a proper secondary place.

One of the principal problems, primary problems of the classroom, is to ward off the attack on the teaching of literature. Not long ago, we had a speaker come to our State to address a similar group to that which we have here, the Oklahoma Foreign Language Teachers Association, and he spent a good part of an impassioned hour lambasting the teaching of literature. Students picked up the same feeling and they attacked the teaching of literature. The following is a similar attack by a student from one of our better Oklahoma high schools. I quote from this article from the Oklahoma City Times: "Twenty-one high school students told the State Superintendent of Public Education what they feel is wrong with their schools, and it boiled down to a lack of qualified counselors, and out-of-date curriculum."

One student from Bartlesville spoke out on the outdated material. She said, "English literature, for example, will have 30-year-old books and 20-year-old methods. We need to learn of our world today, she said, not 150-year-old literature." There is a terrific fallacy. We are up against one of those basic fallacies of contemporary thought. A legacy of existentialism, the idea that history, the past, has no relevance for contemporary man. Existentialism in this respect is a vicious influence. It was a philosophy that was long in coming into its own and had its reason for doing so. The near collapse of Europe after the second World War hastened its development and spread its influence.

Sartre, "the now aging obsolete, odd adolescent," as he was recently called by a French critic, is one of the most popular and successful propagators. Now we must warn students of any philosophy of thought that is conceived in despair and in the immediacy of any crisis. It is too circumscribed by its time. We must tell students in reference to literature, politics, economics, or any other subject, that it is as impossible to cut one's self off from the past, culturally, as it is to cut one's self off from the past physically or biologically. The teaching of literature is one way to prove the falseness of such a statement. Studying literature will help us to see that "Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose." If the French hadn't said anything but that... God bless them, that was one of the finest statements that has

come out of any culture. Literature will help us to see that we are not unique, beautiful people, but rather are a part of humanity, not an isolated segment of it. That we are sometimes beautiful, we are sometimes horrible, monstrous, but most of the time we are all possessed of that something that makes man indomitable in the face of any disaster.

To the student from Bartlesville, I would like to ask that she study the literature in the times of European romanticism, and she will see that most of what she calls the world of today was also the world of yesterday. This past summer I followed along in my wife's tracks in Italy. She is an English teacher, a critic teacher in the University of Oklahoma laboratory school, and we were retracing the steps of those mad romantics. We were going from Rome to Venice to Piza and all of the places that Shelley and Byron had been. And if you can find, today, any hippier ménage than that group, I want to know what it is.

So there, I think, is where you can say that literature does have relevance. You can take the Romantic period, you can make parallels to the period in which we live. It's not the same, true, but it's very very close to it. Then I think if that is done in the classroom, the young lady from Bartlesville will realize as John Dunn said, "that man is not, and that she is not an island unto herself," and that art and history are the most powerful instruments of our inquiry into human nature; and that human nature is not the result just of the here and the now, but also of the there and the then.